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U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture

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October 6, 2005

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The Honorable Mike Johanns
Secretary of Agriculture
United States Department of Agriculture
14th and Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

You recently issued a press release expressing your interest in soliciting "a dialogue with state and congressional leaders to discuss how best to modernize the Farm Service Agency (FSA)."

I completely agree that we should look for ways to improve FSA farm program delivery, but I am concerned about the timing and reasons for your "FSA Tomorrow" plan, which would close one-third of the nation's FSA offices.

Especially after this year's agricultural disasters, rural Americans are relying on the services provided by their local FSA offices, and now is not the time to close them. In rural communities impacted by disasters, farmers depend on county offices for disaster assistance and other farm program delivery. How was workload for disaster assistance this year effectively included in your calculations for FSA Tomorrow?

I am also concerned that web-based services offered by FSA are not able to fill the void that these FSA closures would create. Many rural communities still lag far behind urban and suburban areas when it comes to internet access and broadband capability. So, while many farmers and ranchers have web access, their ability to use it for FSA activities is limited. For example, the electronic Loan Deficiency Payment (eLDP) program, a web-base program touted by USDA officials as a leading example of technology's potential, is often sluggish or completely unavailable for those who try to use it. How do you expect web-based programs to quickly replace current customer service with all the challenges of poor internet access, limited electronic service use, and critical system upgrades? Have you received approval from OMB of your business plan for upgrading your information technology systems? Do you have assurance from the Appropriations Committees that funding needed to make these upgrades will be available?

Debate on the next farm bill has started. In fact, you have held a series of listening sessions asking for input on what changes may be needed in USDA programs. The House and Senate

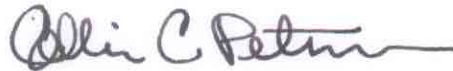
Committee on Agriculture expect to conduct their own series of hearings and listening sessions to further define what changes are necessary. With debate ensuing and so little time left before the next farm bill is drafted, how is it possible to accurately predict future FSA office needs at this time?

I have also heard from people in my district that local plans to lease and build FSA office space are less than certain. In one county, office space leased by FSA was renovated at USDA's request only a few years ago, and now, that lease is being cancelled so that the office can be moved to a new building that is under construction. All this is for an office that is one of those your office has listed as a possible target for closure. At a time when you have identified modernization as a priority, what are the expected costs of the proposal, including an accounting for broken leases, staff and equipment moves, and acquisition of new space?

Finally, the Farm Service Agency is but one of the valuable services available in many of the county offices. The Natural Resources Conservation Service and Rural Development also contribute great resources to our rural communities. Why does this current office closure plan not take into account the total needs for service in county offices?

I appreciate your recognition that it is critical to seek the input of farmers and ranchers, county office employees and federal, state and local agricultural leaders on how closing FSA offices in their communities will impact them. These are the people whose lives and livelihoods depend on agriculture and agricultural programs, and FSA offices are one of their best resources on these issues. I look forward to your prompt reply to these questions and to continued dialogue on how best to deliver quality service to our nation's farmers.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Collin C. Peterson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Collin C. Peterson
Ranking Member
House Committee on Agriculture

CCP:ad